

Jersey farms important to economy

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GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

TRENTON — As Congress begins work to renew the federal farm bill, New Jersey Agriculture Secretary Charles Kuperus is adding the state's voice to the debate.

He's working with his counterparts from other Northeastern states to ensure Congress provides more help to states like New Jersey, where agriculture isn't the biggest economic contributor.

The state recently allowed local farmers to supply produce to 660 food pantries and soup kitchens in New Jersey. New Jersey also is encouraging schools to use local products to stock up vending machines and a la carte lines at cafeterias.

Additionally, the state spends \$1 million to market produce and "Jersey Fresh" and "Jersey Seafood."

Kuperus discussed the state's agriculture industry and his lobbying efforts in a recent interview:

Q. Describe New Jersey's agricultural industry and the farm-related issues the state faces.

A. We are the most densely populated state in the country. We are in the front lines of probably every issue — land use planning, sustaining our agriculture, and preserving our landscape and natural resources. New Jersey is 4.8 million acres big; (approximately) 800,000 of those 4.8 million acres are in active agriculture. We are out there in the marketplace

Garden State farm facts

Though farming isn't its biggest industry, New Jersey is an important player in the nation's agriculture.

National rank	Crop	Acres	Dollar value
2	Blueberries	7,600	\$83.7 million
3	Peaches	7,200	\$35.7 million
3	Spinach	1,700	\$10 million
4	Cranberries	3,100	\$17 million
4	Head lettuce	400	\$700,000
5	Bell peppers	3,200	\$27.8 million
6	Cucumbers	3,300	\$13.4 million
8	Sweet corn	7,000	\$19 million

By the numbers:

Number of New Jersey farms:	Average size (acres per farm):	Total land acreage in N.J.:	Total acreage in farming:
9,900	81	4.8 million	790,000

Source: New Jersey Department of Agriculture

Janet Loehrke, Gannett News Service

with significant product, even with our smaller geography. We're called the Garden State for a reason.

Q. How tough is it for New Jersey farmers to compete against big growers in the Midwest and the South?

A. Our farmers have a hard time competing in a commodity marketplace, so they have to have some specialty. You can't grow blueberries everywhere. You can't grow cranberries everywhere. Peaches need a certain climate. It's people that manage the landscape that are so critical to us. That's why we are so engaged in this national discussion. We can preserve the farmland. Out of the 800,000 acres, we've preserved 157,000 acres so far.

Q. How is farming different in the Garden State compared with the farm belt states?

A. Corn, soybeans, they are big crops. We can't do without them, most certainly. But there

are guys in New Jersey that milk sheep and make cheese. We have clambers, aquaculture. They're an important part of our agriculture. Whether they're growing native plants or plants for wildlife restoration, there's all kinds of things that are happening on the ground level that really are part of that overall mix. A diverse agriculture is important to our country and our state.

Q. What can people do to promote New Jersey agriculture?

A. When you buy a "Jersey Fresh" branded product, or "Jersey Seafood," (the product is) coming from family farms. These are people that have a long history — a heritage — in our state. There's a more robust flavor than something from some other parts of the world. It's the taste experience. People are more conscious of where their produce comes from. People are measuring their carbon footprint now. That's something we haven't had in the recent

past. They want to buy regionally and seasonally.

Q. You've talked about innovative farming. Can you provide some examples?

A. Organic farming. We see a wonderful trend there. The (state Agriculture) department is now accredited to certify farms as organic. It's only 2,200 acres right now in organic production. But we can see a three-year transitional window. There's a lot of land in that three-year transitional window (to go from conventionally to organically farmed). We know that that number's going to go up.

Q. Should Congress reduce subsidy payments elsewhere and divert them to New Jersey?

A. About 1 percent of subsidy dollars flow to New Jersey. Our argument is not that we need to have more than (someone else). We're just as important as other regions of the country. Do we need to develop new agricultural opportunities for our producers? Absolutely. So there are economic development programs that need to be nested in and threaded throughout the farm bill. A lot of things won't change overnight. We're reassembling our priorities. We want to preserve our farmland, we want to keep a viable, thriving agriculture, and we want welcome new people into agriculture.

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